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From victim, to survivor to warrior

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By **Ana Allen (PRMC)**Like One person likes this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

Tripler Army Medical Center (TAMC) held a Sexual Assault Awareness Month observance at Kyser Auditorium on April 1, 2014 to bring awareness to what Army leaders say is the enemy within the ranks.

TAMC leaders invited guest speaker, Staff Sgt. Mary Valdez, a San Antonio, Texas native currently assigned to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii to share her transformation from sexual assault victim, to survivor, to warrior.

Before being welcomed to the stage, an emotional video with interviews by Valdez, played recounting her journey through a long and, what Valdez describes as, a disappointing court hearing where her perpetrator was acquitted despite DNA evidence and a confession.

It also chronicled her participation in several top level Army sexual assault prevention panels where she gave input on policies, procedures and training programs aimed at making the process better for survivors. The video ended with Valdez saying that even though she didn't get justice in her case, she felt justice was being made through her efforts, along with senior military leaders.

Valdez walked to the stage to the sounds of applause from Tripler staff members. "No matter how many times I see that video, I still get emotional," Valdez said as she paused to compose herself.

Valdez said her transformation from victim to survivor to warrior was gradual and that the turning point came following her arrival in Hawaii. "After the trial I looked at the Army uniform with such disgust because I felt the ultimate betrayal in my case. I thought, 'I hate the Army and I'm never ever going to put that uniform on again'. But when I said that my heart just sunk. And that's when I knew that my love was greater than any hate and that I would overcome."

Since then, Valdez says she proudly wears the uniform and is dedicated to fighting the stigma facing sexual assault survivors, speaking at several awareness events, co-founding a support group for survivors and becoming a victim advocate.

Her input to senior Army leaders has also contributed to improvements. "Survivors are now entitled to a special victims counsel, every unit now has a victim advocate and many units have implemented sexual assault battle drills that bring together a chaplain, lawyer, victim advocate, doctor and Army leaders focused on the victim," Valdez said.

"Everyone wearing the uniform has a responsibility. You need to combat this as well," Valdez said, charging the audience members with the task of taking a more active role in the fight against sexual assault.

Spc. Brittany Leitner, 18th Medical Command, also shared her survivor story during the observance and gave a warning to the audience.

"In my case, there were no warning signs, no indication, no flags that told me that this person who became my perpetrator was bad," said Leitner. "But people can wear different faces and you don't know how someone is going to be when you are alone with them. If it happened to me it can happen to you," she said.

Leitner and Valdez say their support group, Survivors 4 Survivors, has been an incredible source of healing in the midst of a traumatic event and invite other survivors to join the Sexual Assault Forum on Thursdays at 3 p.m. at Fort Shafter, building 525, room 115.

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